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New 'Phantom' more than just an ugly face

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Film review

PHANTOM OF THE OPERA has been flexible enough to withstand a lot of interpretations. From the silent film scares of Lon Chaney's characterization to the orchestral twists of Andrew Lloyd Webber's Broadway musical, French writer Gaston Leroux's 1911 novel has always withstood, and often benefited from, these varied adaptations.

But is it ready for Freddy?

You betcha. Director Dwight H. Little, who with his debut *Halloween IV* obviously suffered from the film's straight-jacket formula, borrows from a variety of sources — including actor Robert Englund (better known as Freddy from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series) — to create his visually dazzling interpretation of the apparently ageless thriller.

With its swirling orchestral score and murky, surrealistic lighting, this supernatural *Phantom of the Opera* plays out like a strange mutation of *Amadeus, Beauty and the Beast* (Jean Cocteau's film, not the TV show) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* itself.

The film opens up in New York City 1990. Christine Day (Jill Schoelen), a young and talented Julliard student, and her friend, Meg (Molly Shannon), discover an old musical titled *Don Juan Triumphant* while combing an abandoned section of a Big Apple library. They decide Christine should sing a part of it for her upcoming audition for a Broadway musical.

While singing from the ancient, unfinished musical, Christine is knocked out cold by a sand bag that accidentally falls from the catwalks of the theater. Instantly, she is transported back to England, circa 1889, where she finds herself on stage at the London Opera House.

Christine begins having surrealistic visions of a man in black. The man tells the young woman he's been sent by her dead father to be her instructor and angel. He tells Christine she'll be the star of the new London Opera House musical, which is opening that evening. She doesn't understand. She's only the understudy to the lead, Carlotta (Stephanie Lawrence).

Not surprisingly, Carlotta's voice suddenly becomes paralyzed — not from opening night jitters, but from discovering the skinned body of a prop assistant who's dangling in her dressing room. Christine fills in for Carlotta, inspires several standing ovations with her performance and quickly learns about politics in the arts. The opera critic of the local paper pans her.

The critic is found skinned alive the next day. Enter Scotland Yard detective Hawking (Terence Harvey) who knows all about the legend of the phantom and knows the only way to kill him. Hawking knows the phantom is actually Erik Destler (Englund), a composer who sold his soul to the devil in return for musical fame. The detective also knows the price Destler paid, too. The disfiguration of his face.

"The world will love you for your music," a satanic midget tells the composer during a flashback. "But that's all it will love you for."

Destler is in love with Christina, the only woman he believes can sing his music the way he intended it. In the beginning, he wins her confidence with his gentle musical instruction, which he imparts in the form of a specter. But when he finally reveals himself to her (he grafts skin to his face before appearing in public), she is skeptical of him.

"You love the music, and I am the music," he tells her in his cavernous digs beneath the opera house, slipping a ring on her finger. "Our souls will be as one."

Christina wants none of this. She, after all, is in love with Richard (Alex Hyde-White), a major sponsor of the opera and one of her major supporters. For his part, Richard is ignorant to the *real* phantom legend. Until Hawking fills him in, that is.

Once the stage is set, Richard, Hawking and Christina begin a search and destroy mission for the phantom that won't end until a century later, on another continent all the way across the Atlantic.

Considering the glut of supernatural schlock, screenwriter Duke Sandefur, who based his script on a screenplay by Gerry O'Hara, took a chance creating a supernatural phantom. But his thoughtful adaptation, combined with Little's supercharged visual touches and Misha Segal's aggressive score, make for a horror flick that is both graphically frightening and intellectually fascinating.

And what about Englund? Can he actually do more than wear an entire makeup department on his face, slash young kids and deliver cheesy one-liners? You better believe it. He's just one of many pleasant surprises in *Phantom of the Opera*.

The Phantom (Robert Englund, a k a Freddy from *Nightmare on Elm Street*) entrances his hated victim, the opera singer Carlotta (Stephanie Lawrence).

PHANTOM OF THE OPERA
★ ★ ★ (out of four stars)

A 21st Century Film Corp. release directed by Dwight H. Little. Screenplay by Duke Sandefur based on a screenplay by Gerry O'Hara. Cinematography by Elemer Ragalyi. Cast features: Robert Englund, Jill Schoelen, Alex Hyde-White and Terence Harvey. Running time: 95 minutes. Rated: **R**.

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